

Expanding the Space, Breaking the Time:

A Research of the Audio-Visual Language of Multi-Screen Video Installation

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Introduction

I'm working with video installations. With a background from painting and filmmaking, I focus on the relationship between different spaces, using lights, performance, scenes and audio to expand the space and break the time.

This MA text aims to explore multi-screen video on the basis of my own practical experience and relative study of the subject matter. More specifically, I'm trying to solve the problem of video itself, such as video space, time, screen composition, performance, and the filmic structure. Even the characteristics of the lens itself, the choice of playing mode, as well as the installation in terms of set-up, environmental arrangement, on-the-spot multi-screen projection, etc., were all used for serving the visual performance of video art. However, no matter in which way, there is no denying that video is the art of time and space. The multi-screen video installation recombines time and space in the image itself. When the presentation space is constructed using multi-screen projection, the environment must have significant influence on the work. Thus, using multiple screens is to import montage into the video installation, constructing montage in three-dimensional space, which has the effect of deconstructing and extending time and space.

In my video work *Wearing the Fog*, I tried to explore the video language in both form and content simultaneously. The work focuses on a family living in a city whose industry is developing rather rapidly. Inside of the family, it is full of indifference, confrontation and estrangement. Due to the lack of administrative control, the air pollution is very serious in this city. In daily life, people have to communicate with each other through the obstruction of gauze mask and fog. This kind of interaction disrupts the possibility of real contact. I mix the feeling towards this severe reality and the understanding towards family life to show the gap between two generations, the estrangement between the father and the mother and the clash between individual and social development, all of which is enhanced and manifested through the use of double-screen. For instance, in the scene of the ice lake, I use the double-screen to divide people. They are trying to make contact, but it is hard to find each other. Communication seems to be more feeble and powerless. The use of double-screen video installation enlarges the distance of man-to-man and man-to-city, showing the indifference of industrial development and the destructive power of a domestic

cold violence. The key question is what are the exact differences between the films played by multi-screen video installation and single screen from the perspective of audio-visual language?

But more questions were raised after I made this work. How to deal with sound in multi-screen video installation? How to make the audience's ears identify the complex sound from double-screen images? Can multi-screen video installation be combined with linear narrative?

The Earlier Split Screen Film and The Multi-Screen Video Installation

Since the invention of the camera, the single screen video has existed as a standard. Since the early 1950s, film makers have been trying various split screen techniques. But there was not much relative theories at that time. In the 1960s, the use of split screen video extended to the field of art. Split screen video and multi-screen video were moved into private galleries and museums. Maeve Connolly writes in her book, *The Place of Artists*, "The multi- screen video projection has attracted considerable critical attention from film and media scholars as well as art historians. In fact this mode of presentation has become so conventional that curators such as Chrissie Iles have actually begun to bemoan the decline of the single screen video work."¹ Nowadays, the use of multi-screen video has become one of the conventional tools of artists and film makers.

The development of film laid a foundation for video installation's emergence in the field of art. However, multi-screen video used to be mentioned in a relatively limited way or mentioned in an incidental way within film history. Although it has never been popular in a wide range, it has existed since the split screen appeared. Here it must be mentioned that *Pillow Talk* (Michael Gordon, 1959, Fig.1), as well as *Desk Set* (Walter Lang, 1957), *Indiscreet* (Stanley Donen, 1958), and *The Grass Is Greener* (Stanley Donen, 1960), are interesting examples of extending the single frame or screen. During this period, the film makers' use of split screen is mainly for splitting the images within one screen and forming space montage. For instance, in *Pillow Talk* (Fig.1) , the split screen often appeared

¹ Maeve Connolly. *The place of Artists' Cinema : Space, Site and Screen. Chapter3 Multi-Screen Projections and Museum Spaces. Printed and bound by Gutenberg Press, Malta.p63.*



Fig 1. Michael Gordon. *Pillow Talk*, 1959.

when the two protagonists were talking on the phone and when the actors' bodies acted in cooperation with each other. Through splicing the two images, it made the audience feel that the protagonists had mutual affinity with each other though they are in different spaces. Hager argued that the depiction of the shared-but-separate telephonic space was one of three major technological influences that had motivated the exploration of cinematic split screens.²

In 1958, talented stage installation artist and designer, Svoboda, exhibited her invention of multi-screen array in the Brussels World's Fair. It was an unprecedented visual feast at that time. *Polyekran* (Fig.2) is an eleven-minute long movie composed of 15,000 slides. At the time of the exhibition, the multi-screen videos of 112 cubes changed and recombined continuously. This is the budding stage of early video installation and it is also a challenge to non-linear narrative.



Fig 2. Svoboda. *Polyekran*, 1958

Since then, split screen video work and multi-screen video installations began to appear frequently in World Expos. In 1964, triple-screen video installation *To Be Alive* made a great flutter in the New York World's Fair and became the pioneer work in split screen history. In 1976, another famous work was *Canada 67* (Fig.3), entrusted by Canada telephone companies, which is a 22-minute Circle-Vision 360 degree video installation that

² Jim Bizzocchi, *The Fragmented Frame: The Poetics of the Split-Screen*, School of Interactive Arts and Technology Simon Fraser University. 2009. Available online at < <http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/mit6/papers/Bizzocchi.pdf> > Viewed March 11.2016

includes 1500 people standing in the middle, surrounded by nine big screens and 12 synchronous sound tracks and the nine projectors hiding in the gaps between the nine screens.

It is not hard to see that the early film split screen and multi-screen video installations mostly use the parallel narrative montage to record nature and human, or split the images in a single screen. In *Canada 67*, the nine screens not only split the 360-degree image, but also change the traditional way of watching films. However, the images played by the nine screens just happened at the same time and within the same space. It only broke the original limitations of single screen's shortage on the size of a picture technically. From the perspective of video language, it didn't show too many characteristics of multi-screen video, while *To Be Alive* and *Pillow Talk* used the way of splitting the image, which belongs to the category of the split screen film.



Fig 3. *Canada 67*.documentary film by Robert Barclay, 1976

The Extension of Montage in Multi-Screen Video Installation

In 1926, Sergei Eisenstein divided montage as single-lens montage and multi-lens montage in his *Essays in Film Theory*. He also expanded the definition of montage from “the relationship between the lens and lens” to “all matters related to the lens, including all the elements related to the film in the scene”. He wrote, “Two or more images edited together create a "tertium quid" (third thing) that makes the whole greater than the sum of its individual parts.”³ French film theorist Andre Bazin once disagreed with the use of montage because he believed that montage would impose the director's viewpoints on the audience so that it would restrict the film's possibilities of diversity. He insisted that we should shoot a film by the depth of field shot and the long continuous shooting shot by

³ *Sergei Eisenstein Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*. Harcourt; Edition Unstated edition (March 19, 1969)

means of *mise-en-scene*. Only in this way can we maintain the integrity of the space and follow the real time flow. Anyway, the function of montage cannot be denied. The key point of montage theory is through the combination of lens and lens to tell stories, to portray characters and to express ideas. Then what kind of combination might time and space have in multi-screen video? And what changes have taken place due to the occurrence of montage?

In 2005, the paratactic triple-screen video installation *Telling the Truth?* (Fig.4) by the director Angus Gibson was displayed at the Venice Biennale. “On one screen is a person testifying. On the other two screens are texts and images that speak to what we are hearing from the victim, the perpetrator or those listening to the testimony. We are watching conversations or confrontations as though we have entered the room, as though it were possible to witness the telling, understand its import, and judge its terrible truth in the light of history.”⁴



Fig 4. Angus Gibson, *Telling the Truth?* 2015.

In this work, three screens were placed parallel to each other. Between the screens there was the battle of truth. Audiences could see the victim, the perpetrator, and Amnesty arguing at the same time. The montage occurred between the interactions of the three screens. Of course, the director decided what to play in each screen, which screen's characters speak and when to say, as well as when the time for contemplation or static-frame is. But the parallel setting of the three screens made the audience receive the information of different images at the same time, and the different combination in each audience's mind formed different kinds of montage. In single screen video, montage is formed through editing various shots. Or in a long shot, the scheduling of actors and the movement of lens can form internal montage. While in *Telling the Truth*, montage was extended to another possibility. Through the parallel image, it formed a space montage outside of images instead of just the linear splicing between different images.

⁴ Angus Gibson, *Telling the Truth?* Available online at < <http://thesouthafricanpavilion.co.za/angus-gibson/> > Viewed March 12.2016



Fig 5. Yang Zhenzhong , *Let's puff!* 2002

Let's Puff! (Fig.5) by Yang Zhenzhong is another example, exhibited at the Shanghai Biennale in 2002. It was composed of two synchronized videos projected face to face in a dark space. Video A shows a girl blowing towards the camera. While video B shows us a pedestrian street. The two screens interact with each other simultaneously. When the girl in video A is blowing, the street in video B will be pushed forward and they move in the same rhythm. Thus it seems that the street is blown away by the girl. When the girl stopped puffing, the objects in the scene would stop too, and continued returning in this cyclical loop. The artist organized the time orderly in the later production and cut and edited the film smoothly. The combination of images was fulfilled during the progress of audiences watching it and it achieved the montage effect by making virtual airflow across double screen video. It formed a virtual time and space between the two screens. The space in the images extended to the outside of the screen. The control-and-being-controlled relationship between urban landscape and its users (the citizens) was amplified and became absurd through the interaction of two screens.

In the video installation, combination, installation or splice, refers to exploiting and restructuring the two or more elements, gradually changing the original image and the modeling elements to gain a kind of new visual form or special effects. In fact, the montage of film editing also means combination, installation and splice. When it is used in film, it is just the editing way of splicing and combination, which is to edit the scattered or individual materials through digital technique of combination and integration in order to form a new whole and completed work.

The Time-Space Relationship in Multi-Screen Video Installation

In the field of art, the screen, as a display tool, has become the new sculptural language of artists. They make full use of screen and exhibition space to deconstruct and reorganize the concept of space. In other words, multiple screens can divide the space as the extension of a multi-dimensional space. In addition, the intervention of video itself also broadens the spatial dimension of an artistic work. The real space contains the conceptualized perceptual space, which exists in work as a virtual objective space.

English artist Isaac Julien's video installation *Ten Thousand Waves* (Fig.6) is an example, which was displayed at MoMA in 2010. The work was projected onto nine double-sided screens in different sizes and height. The nine criss-crossing screens divided the space of the exhibition hall. It broke the audience's habit of watching the rectangular vertical screen and changed the conventional perspective which is from a fixed position. When the audience stayed in the exhibition hall, it seems that they walked into a dark room with hanging films. They would see various aspects of Chinese society through the reconstruction and recombination of those criss-crossing images. Multi-dimensional space can make the audience enjoy the film from different angles and decide their own spatial relationship with the work.



Fig 6. Issac Julien. *Ten Thousand waves*,2010

Compared with split screen film, multi-screen video installation has stronger experimental, conceptual, and interactive characters. And its use of space is also one of the differences from film. The space can be reconstructed, recombined, spliced and juxtaposed inside the multi-screen video installation. Even the space structure can be multi-faceted, stereo, and interactive. Based on my own practice, I will illustrate how to recombine the internal space-and-time of the multi-screen video installation.

The Practice Process and The Corresponding Summary of Video Installation

In 2014, I tried to use the exhibition space as part of the work, and made a video installation titled *Long Distance*, which is aimed at showing the dynamics of a heterosexual relationship. I put two screens opposite to each other. Through the interaction between the two characters on the screens, the internal space between the screens was extended and thus the space montage happened in real space. (Fig.7)

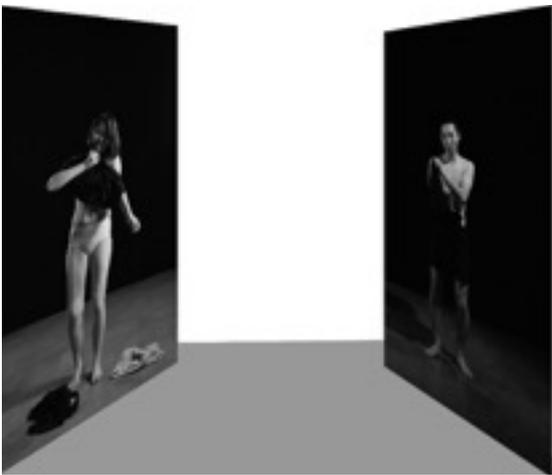


Fig 7. Yafei Qi. *Long Distance*.2014

The girl took off her clothes and threw it to the boy. The boy put the clothes on and took off it and threw it back. They repeated the movement again and again, until they were both tired and exhausted. The space between the two screens was the distance between the two characters in the screens and also the viewing area for the audience. At that time, I didn't know Yang Zhenzhong's *Let's Puff!*, though this work had been displaced at the Shanghai Biennale in 2002.

From the perspective of video language, I think these two works both extend the internal space of the works by making use of the exhibition space. However, I found that the equipment used for the work also have their own characteristics through this experimental process.

In 2015, I made another video interactive work *The Others* (Fig.8). I extended the video space of the single screen to make the audience participating in the work in the real space. In this work, time was fixed in the image and the extension of space added the participation and interaction part. This video is composed of 303 HD pictures, which were taken on a summers night. There are a lot of high-rise buildings in my neighborhood. I often sit on the balcony, looking out through the glass windows. I know a boy who always plays computer games until mid-night. I know a girl who starts stripping off all her clothes after arriving home. I know a pair of lovers who both are preparing for exam. Through each little screen, I can see each little family's epitome. Gradually the people become familiar

who live in the opposite buildings. Do I really know them? Maybe others also view me through the window. This is the distance of life, between others and me.



Fig 8. *Yafei Qi. The Others. 2015*

I installed a camera with automatic shutter equipment and set it to take two pictures per minute automatically. From 11:00pm to 01:30am approximately, it took 316 pictures in total, all-lights-on to all-lights-off (several of the last pictures have been edited). I selected 303 pictures with used motion sensors for making the work called “The Others”. In an exhibition I hid the sensor under the screen, which can sense the distance between people and the screen. When the distance between the audience and the screen is more than one meter, the screen will show the video with many people in their rooms, having a rest or being busy doing something, with all lights on. When the audience comes close to the screen, all the lights turn off gradually, and finally only a street remains lit in the dark. When the audience walks away from the screen, all the lights begin to turn on little by little, and people begin to move again. The core idea for developing “The Others” is that when the audience is a certain distance from the screen they can see various people living in their rooms. If the audience wants to see more details from their lives they have to step forward and come close to the screen. But once the audience comes close to their lives, they will turn off the lights. It seems that other people lives remain at a distance forever. This is my second time to experiment during my master’s project where I extended the space out of the picture and added an interactive installation with the original one. It was a good try for me on the practice of video installation language, but I didn’t form a complete theory of video installation language and my understanding towards the space in video installation was not sufficient enough at that time.



Fig 9. Yafei Qi. *Wearing the fog* .2016

Thus, I wanted to try a new way to extend or condense the time and the space at the same time in my final MA work. Yet, I made the double-screen video installation “Wearing the Fog” with the above questions. *Wearing the Fog* is a double-screen video installation with a non-linear narrative structure. It shows a family living in a city whose industry is developing rapidly and the protagonist sister’s feeling to the indifference of the family and the cold of the industrial world. It consists of multiple stories, told in a non-linear fashion, one of which is a story about the father’s mistress (Fig.9). On the left screen, the sister is seen cursing her father’s mistress on the phone. On the right screen, the father is patiently teaching the mother to drive. This juxtaposition expresses the complexity and the absurdity of life, especially within the context of contemporary China. Through the juxtaposition of two screens, the work tells two stories happening in different spaces yet at the same time. It forms a space montage between the two images. Space is placed horizontally in multi-screen video installation.



Fig.10. Yafei Qi. *Wearing the fog* .2016

In the scene of the sister drinking (Fig.10), the right screen shows the sister getting up and walking into the room, and the left screen is a static frame that the sister walks out of the

room holding a wine bottle. I used two screens to show the development of a plot at the same time. One screen tells the beginning of the story, and another screen tells the ending of the story. Here the audience receives the two messages at the same time. It is impossible to show it in the single screen video. The movement process shown in the video determines its extension of the time, namely, the characteristic of timeliness. The actual time is not only shown in the progress of video playing, but can also be extended or condensed subjectively in the narrative process. Multi-screen video installation can freely splice the images according to the directive of the artist, rather than arrange the images in linear time sequence. In this way, time has a multiplicity here.

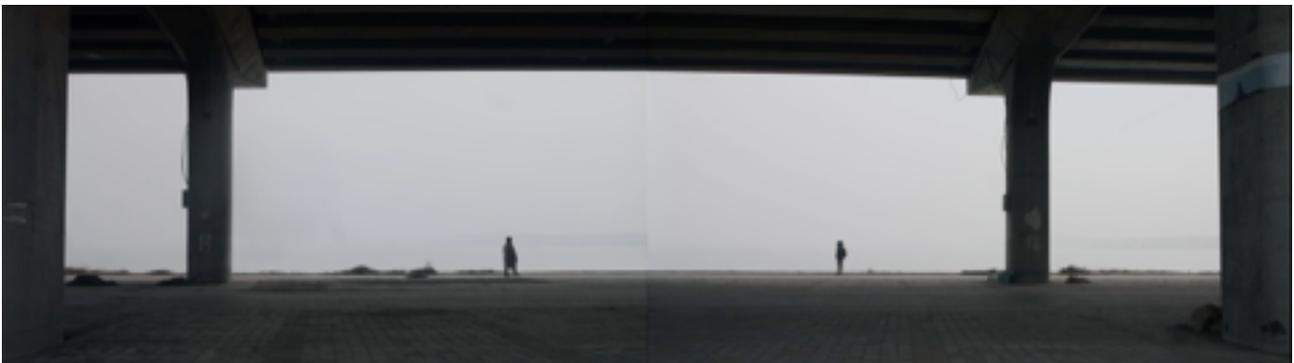


Fig 11. Yafei Qi. *Wearing the fog* .2016

As for the use of sound in the double-screen video installation, there are still a lot of directions to be explored. In *Wearing the Fog*, I tried to use the sound as part of the interaction of the plot. In the scene of the mother and the daughter having a talk under the bridge (Fig.11), the mother and the daughter are not only divided by two screens in the image, but also divided by two sound tracks. Thus both their images and sounds are at a stalemate within different spaces. However, I presume, if I use 5.1 stereo surround sound, it will add another possibility. Maybe the exhibition space can be better used and it might gain a better effect of extension.

Summing Up

I'm still doing a large variety of attempts on sound and music. During the process of exploring and practicing the multi-screen video language, more questions were raised.

Since the reset of editing techniques may change the montage and thus influence the video structure, if we avoid to use montage, then what kind of ways will the long shot move in the multi-screen video installation? If the emotion conveyed by the two images is different, how to manage the background music? I look forward to having more practice and exercises to solve these above questions, and to gain a greater knowledge of multi-screen video installation.

Bibliography

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5. Fig 7-Fig11 “Long Distance”, “The Others”, “Wearing the Fog”, Available online at <<http://qiyafei.com/>>